

Cursed players

REUTERS, Yokohama

The suspension of German playmaker Michael Ballack for picking up his second yellow card of the World Cup's knockout stages means that a key player will be barred from the final for the fourth tournament in a row.

Central defender Laurent Blanc missed France's 3-0 win over Brazil in the 1998 final after being sent off against Croatia in the semi-final.

In 1994, Italian defender Alessandro Costacurta was suspended for a second yellow card picked up in the semi-final against Bulgaria. Italy lost on penalties in the final against Brazil after a 0-0 draw.

Four years earlier, Argentina had four players suspended for the final with West Germany, including forward Claudio Caniggia. Caniggia scored the equaliser in the 1-1 semi-final draw with Italy before getting a second yellow card.

West Germany won the final 1-0 and two Argentine players were sent off.



PHOTO: AFP

Employees of an Asian carmaker in Frankfurt, Germany, react while watching the World Cup semifinal between Germany and South Korea on a large screen at their work place on May 25.

Ronaldo was punched?

REUTERS, Saitama

Brazil's semi-final match-winner Ronaldo says he was punched by a Turkey defender during the World Cup semi-final.

Ronaldo, whose 49th minute goal settled a tight, well-contested match, lashed out angrily at Bulent Korkmaz after a clash between the pair.

"The problem was, I think, with the player number three (Bulent) for Turkey," Ronaldo said.

"We fell together to the floor. After that when we both got up he stepped on me and hit me with his fist on my head. That made me very angry and that was the reason why I reacted as such."

Best not always

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to stay at home because he was not fit enough.

Now the third pillar of German creativity in midfield, Michael Ballack is also out, suspended following his second yellow card against the Koreans on Friday - just four minutes before notching the only goal of the game and his third of the tournament.

Voller knows he is running out of aces up his sleeve.

"It's almost impossible to replace Ballack completely. And it's all the more surprising we are here in the final as we've lost virtually all our defence.

"Nowotny, Worns, also Marko Rehmer - that's three pillars of our qualifying campaign," noted Voller.

"We have had to field a makeshift defence.

"But what was designed as a stop-gap solution has turned into a revelation," added Voller, who paid tribute to those who have stepped into the breach.

The heroic back four have along with world-class keeper Oliver Kahn conceded just one goal so far, becoming the meanest defence of any finalist since England in 1966.

The four comprise rookie Christoph Metzelder, Thomas Linke, Torsten Frings and Carsten Ramelow, who bounced back from a suspension and being dropped against the United States to star against the Koreans.

Voller says his makeshift side have gone a long way to silencing the critics.

"With what German sides have achieved in the past 30 or 40 years it was clear we have a lot to live up to and it was normal we'd get criticised.

"But we have to get away from the idea that Germany can only lose to a handful of countries. Asia and Africa are catching up," said Voller, praising the Koreans and noting that Cameroon, had they not slipped up against his own side, would have been one of his bets for a place in the last four.

Europe here we come

REUTERS, Seoul

South Korea's extraordinary run in the World Cup has showcased a team full of fresh, young talent to the top clubs in Europe.

Coach Guus Hiddink's young charges took South Korea into the history books as Asia's first ever World Cup semi-finalists.

They will now form the core of a formidable side for the 2004 Olympics and next World Cup buoyed by finals victories over Poland, Portugal, Italy and Spain.

Hiddink gave Cha Du-ri a start in Tuesday's 1-0 semifinal defeat against Germany where the lanky 21-year-old showed off his pace and nimble passing.

Dubbed the "human bomb" for his explosive speed, Cha plays for Korea University but his World Cup experience is expected to send him along the path of his father, Cha Bum-keun, who played in the Bundesliga with Bayer Leverkusen.

With the wins has come confidence and dreams of moving to Europe, where just two of the squad of 23 now play.

"They're the next generation to lead Korean football," veteran striker Hwang Sun-hong said of front-line mates Cha and 20-year-old Lee Chun-soo.

The 33-year-old Hwang, with 50 goals and 102 caps plans to retire from international competition after the tournament.

Captain Hong Myung-bo at 33 is

also unlikely to be at the next World Cup.

In line are young players including versatile 23-year-old midfielder Song Chong-gug and 21-year-old Park Ji-sung.

"I don't have any particular team in my mind but I want to play in a big league," Park told reporters on Tuesday.

Park is under contract with Kyoto Purple Sanga and youngest of the five South Korea players in Japan's J League.

He scored one of the tournament's most skillful goals in a 1-0 win over Portugal, taking the ball with his right foot, bouncing it off his chest to spin a defender and drilling a left footer under keeper Vitor Baia.

He also scored against France and England in friendlies last month.

Song marked Luis Figo in the Portugal match, drawing roars of approval from South Korea's delighted Red Devil fans by repeatedly stripping FIFA's world player of the year of the ball.

He plays for the Pusan I-cons, one of 10 teams in the domestic K League where most of the national team play.

Ahn Jung-hwan, who headed home the golden goal that dumped Italy out of the World Cup, is one of only two South Korea players in Europe now.

Ahn had struggled for a spot in the line-up with Serie A side Perugia but has grown through the tournament, scoring two goals and this

week he renegotiated his contract.

Earlier, Perugia's chairman had bristled over the Italy defeat and vowed never to take Ahn back.

Seol Ki-hyeon, who also scored in the 2-1 win over Italy, plays for Belgian side Anderlecht and like Ahn has found his form with the national team.

Tvangle

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Ballack started coming into the game, and the Germans completely took over possession in midfield. If they hadn't concentrated on such a one-dimensional strategy of constantly playing the ball to the wings, they may have scored more goals through other avenues. As it is, the goal did come from one of those balls from the wing. Neuville's low ball after some good work down the right should have been dealt with by the Korean defence, but they seemed too tired to fling themselves in the way of the ball.

And Ballack, sneaking up from behind, got the goal after two bites at the cherry. He will miss the final though, and Germany will find it hard to replace him, because he is irreplaceable. He may be moody, drifting out of games at times, but his ability to control the pace and flow of a game with his pinpoint passing and intelligent movement, is something no other German midfielder has.

Korea predictably started to push men forward after the goal, but you could see from a while off that the Germans, led by the excellent Ramelew and with Kahn at his best, were not going to concede a goal. A late chance provided a shot at glory for Park Ji-sung, but his terrible miss signalled the end for the Red Devils. They went down fighting, and should hold their heads up high. Germany will start believing a place in World Cup finals is an almost divine right for them, after making it through to their seventh final. With victory, they can claim their fourth triumph, and third since the introduction of the new trophy. Brazil permanently got the Jules Rimet Cup after their third triumph. Oliver Kahn may just be the last man to lift the present Cup of Life.

SCORING CHART

AFP, Seoul

World Cup scorers after Wednesday's semifinal match: 6 Ronaldo (BRA).

5 - Miroslav Klose (GER), Rivaldo (BRA).

4 - Jon Dahl Tomasson (DEN), Christian Vieri (ITA).

3 - Michael Ballack (GER), Pape Boubou Diop (SEN), Robbie Keane (IRL), Henrik Larsson (SWE), Fernando Morientes (SPA), Pauleta (POR), Raul (SPA), Marc Wilmots (BEL).

2 - Ahn Jung-Hwan Ahn (KOR), Jared Borgetti (MEX), Henri Camara (SEN), Nelson Cuevas (PAR), Landon Donovan (USA), Fernando Hierro (SPA), Ronald Gomez (CRC), Hasan Sas (TUR), Junichi Inamoto (JPN), Brian McBride (USA), Michael Owen (ENG), Ronaldinho (BRA), Umit Davala (TUR).

1 - Milenko Acimovic (SLO), Julius Aghahowa (NGR), Niclas Alexandersson (SWE), Francisco Arce (PAR), Gabriel Batistuta (ARG), David Beckham (ENG), Vladimir Beschastnykh (RUS), Beto (POR), Oliver Bierhoff (GER), Cuauhtemoc Blanco (MEX), Marco Bode (GER), Raouf Bouzaine (TUN), Gary Breen (IRL), Bulent (TUR), Sol Campbell (ENG), Jorge Campos (PAR), Sebastian Cimirotic (SLO), Hernan Crespo (ARG), Alessandro Del Piero (ITA), Agustin Delgado (ECU), Salif Diao (SEN), Damien Duff (IRL), Edmilson (BRA), Emre Belozoglu (TUR), Samuel Eto'o (CMR), Khalidou Fadiqa (SEN), Rio Ferdinand (ENG), Diego Forlan (URU), Quinton Fortune (RSA), Emile Heskey (ENG), Matt Holland (IRL), Hwang Sun-Hong (KOR), Ilhan (TUR), Carsten Jancker (GER), Junior (BRA), Valery Karpin (RUS), Pawel Kryszalowicz (POL), Thomas Linke (GER), Clint Mathis (USA), Benedict McCarthy (RSA), Edison Mendez (ECU), Gaizka Mendietta (SPA), Teboho Mokoena (RSA), Richard Morales (URU), Hiroaki Morishima (JPN), Hidetoshi Nakata (JPN), Oliver Neuville (GER), Siyabonga Nomvethe (RSA), John O'Brien (USA), Ivica Olic (CRO), Emmanuel Olisadebe (POL), Park Ji-Sung Park (KOR), Winston Parks (CRC), Patrick Mboma (CMR), Lucas Radebe (RSA), Milan Rapacic (CRC), Alvaro Recoba (URU), Roberto Carlos (BRA), Dario Rodriguez (URU), Dennis Rommedahl (DEN), Rui Costa (POR), Roque Santa Cruz (PAR), Bernd Schneider (GER), Seol Ki-Hyeon (KOR), Wesley Sonck (BEL), Takayuki Suzuki (JPN), Anders Svensson (SWE), Dmitri Sychev (RUS), Egor Titov (RUS), Gerardo Torrado (MEX), Valeron (SPA), Peter Van der Heyden (BEL), Johan Walem (BEL), Paulo Cesar Wanchope (CRC), Mauricio Wright (CRC), Yoo Sang-Chul Yoo (KOR), Marcin Zewiakow (POL).

Original Kahn

AFP, Seoul

Ireland's Robbie Keane must be hailed as one of the greatest strikers in the 2002 World Cup - for the Irishman has done what no one else in the tournament has managed - put a goal past German captain and goalkeeper Oliver Kahn.

Keane leapt onto a head on from Niall Quinn and from close range hit a shot that even Kahn could not stop.

As the Irish celebrated, Kahn was telling his defence exactly what he thought of them. Failure, in any form is not a word the 33-year-old accepts.

And as Germany marched relentlessly towards the World Cup final in quest of their fourth title the praises began to be heaped on the Bayern Munich keeper.

American coach Bruce Arena paid tribute to the brilliance of Kahn when he single handedly kept the United States at bay and send them packing off home when they met in the quarterfinals.

"Oliver Kahn made the difference here," Arena said after the United States lost 1-0 in their quarterfinal

here. "He made a string of saves and kept them in the game," said Arena, stunned at Germany's ability to survive intense pressure for nearly all the game.

"If we had got a goal we could have put them under a lot of pressure but they came through and that is the strength of their team.

"The match was about chances. We had a lot but could not score. The Germans had two and converted one and that was the difference."

Even German coach Rudi Voller was quick to concede after the US match the role Kahn had played in a keeping a very ordinary side still in football's most glittering tournament.

"Oliver Kahn saved our lives so many times in the first half. We knew if we wanted to get far in this World Cup then we needed a fantastic Oliver Kahn.

"I think we are pretty lucky to have got into the semi-finals, but I am not happy with the performance."

But perhaps the greatest compliment to Kahn is the Korea-Japan

World Cup came from fellow goalkeeper Jose Luis Chilavert.

Not a man known for his modesty, Chilavert surprised everyone when he allowed Kahn to be put alongside him on his pedestal.

"The two best goalkeepers in the world: Kahn and Chilavert," said the South American before watching Paraguay going down to Germany.

Playing in probably his last World Cup, it has been a hard road for the no-nonsense Kahn.

First capped in 1995 against Switzerland, he had to spend the next three years playing second fiddle to Andreas Kopke.

It was only when Kopke announced his retirement at the end of France'98 that Kahn finally became Germany's number one goalkeeper.

Kahn has revelled in it. He was voted German footballer of the year in 2000 and the best goalkeeper in Europe.

If he can keep a clean sheet in Sunday's final he will be in line for the award of best player of the 2002 World Cup.

Meier perfect

REUTERS, Seoul

With the eyes of the world upon him Swiss referee Urs Meier delivered a top-class display in Tuesday's World Cup semi-final, won 1-0 by Germany against South Korea, going some way to restoring the reputation of heavily criticised match officials.

Controversy had surrounded co-hosts South Korea's victories over Italy and Spain in the previous rounds, but neither side could have any real cause for complaint with the performance of the 43-year-old Meier.

FIFA had opted for six European officials for the semi-finals after



URS MEIER

heavy criticism of the performances of Egyptian referee Gamal Ghandour and his Ugandan and Trinidadian linesmen in South Korea's quarter-final win over Spain on Saturday in which two Spanish goals were incorrectly ruled out.

The confident and authoritative display by Meier, a regular in Champions League fixtures who also officiated in the World Cup in France four years ago, will add strength to the view that only officials with experience of major competitions should take charge of high-pressure World Cup matches.

Tuesday's semi-final was relatively free of difficult decisions but when all eyes turned to Meier with two German penalty appeals the referee was right on both occasions.

In the 24th minute German striker Miroslav Klose went down in the Korean penalty area but despite a huge appeal from the German bench, Meier waved away the protests and television replays showed he was right to view the fall as a dive.

Five minutes from the end, Oliver Neuville clearly dived when attempting to round South Korea goalkeeper Lee Woon-jae and Meier was perfectly correct to punish the German with a yellow card.

Gone full circle

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destroyed them 5-1 in a World Cup qualifier.

As a result of that stunning loss Germany, still reeling from a disastrous Euro 2000 campaign, had to qualify through the back door of a playoff win over Ukraine.

But by then, something had stirred in the Teutonic kingdom. Not only had a little pride begun to seep back into the team's consciousness, but also Voller had decided to blood a new generation of promising youngsters.

For Michael Ballack, Christoph Metzelder and company, their time had come to sink - or to swim to glory.

The detractors, who have on occasion included Beckenbauer, may point to an "easy" first round group of Saudi Arabia, Ireland and Cameroon - the Olympic and African champions nonetheless.

And they may harp on at how Paraguay and the United States were only beaten 1-0, with German goalkeeper Oliver Kahn - according to Beckenbauer the team's only world class player - man of the match against the Americans.

But Italy were never strangers to single-goal victories on the way to their own three world titles - and the Germans had used up most of their bad luck quota before they even got here.

They had pinned most of their hopes on creative midfielder Sebastian Deisler, who will next

season partner Ballack at Bayern Munich.

But two knee injuries wrecked the 22-year-old's season and ruined his World Cup dreams.

Bayern midfielder Mehmet Scholl, had already ruled himself out because of lack of fitness while Bayer Leverkusen's Jens Nowotny missed the event after tearing knee ligaments and defensive partner Christian Worns was also ruled out with a knee problem.

Half a team missing, frustration and a lack of confidence at home, the naysayers queuing up to slate the team before they had even got on the plane for Asia.

But despite the emergence of the South Koreans, the Turks and the Senegals, there are some constants in World Cup life.

One of them is Germany in a World Cup final.

Wins in 1954, 1974 with Beckenbauer as skipper, 1990 with Beckenbauer as coach and Voller wearing the number nine shirt.

Final defeats in 1966, 1982 and 1986.

And now it's seven-up. Voller essentially has his eye on blending Deisler and company into his mix for Euro 2004 - but even if this World Cup ranks as a tournament of surprises one other message shines through.

Never bet against the Germans.

Bad luck Ballack

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"Germany survive on compact team performance," Voller explained.

But the absence of the player who also scored the winner against the United States in the quarterfinals and got on the scoresheet in the 8-0 drubbing over Saudi Arabia in

Ballack, Germany's best outfield player at these finals, said he had no hesitation in downing Lee as he bore down on goal in the 71st minute with the scores level at 0-0.

"It was a silly situation. But if I'd not done it they'd have had a man free for a clear run on goal," he said.

Ballack would have desperately wanted to play in the final to make up for a frustrating season with Bayer Leverkusen, who lived up to their reputation as perpetual runners-up by losing the Champions League and German Cup finals and finishing second to Borussia Dortmund in the Bundesliga.

Germany's hopes relied heavily on the elegant Ballack, the only genuine world-class player at the heart of the team after fellow creative midfielders Sebastian Deisler and Mehmet Scholl pulled out

injured in the build-up to the finals.

Ballack entered the tournament exhausted and hampered by a bruised foot which he could not rest because of a hectic finale to the season.

He had looked better with every World Cup match but sustained a calf muscle injury which slowed his progress.

Still, he was instrumental in his revived team's run to a record seventh final, scoring three goals and setting up four more in dedicated, if not scintillating displays.

"Even though he was not at 100 per cent Michael did what he always does, which is to give everything he has to the team," Voeller, a member of the German side which won the 1990 World Cup, said.

Perhaps Germany can take some cheer from a recent precedent.

In 1998, veteran French defender Laurent Blanc had to miss the final he had helped his side to reach after he was sent off in the semifinal. France crushed Brazil 3-0 in the final without him.

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Two referees better than one

REUTERS, Nyon

UEFA have called for soccer to experiment with two referees after major controversies at the World Cup finals in South Korea and Japan.

Gerhard Aigner, chief executive of European soccer's governing body, said the experiments should be undertaken outside the top levels of the professional game.

In an interview with UEFA's website uefa.com, he said: "It must be an advantage for the simple fact that the referee is less tired, he can be closer to the action and has a better chance of judging a situation such as off-side.

CUP CORNER

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Panzer Mannschaft - the tank team.

DARINGLY DIFFERENT

REUTERS, Berlin

A bank robber took advantage of the pandemonium sweeping Berlin during the final frenzied moments of Germany's World Cup semifinal win on Tuesday with a hold-up in the centre of the city, police said.

Police said the robber entered a bank on the city's central Kurfurstendamm shopping avenue about five minutes before the match in South Korea ended and handed a bank teller a note demanding money that also made reference to a gun he was holding concealed in his hand.

Several thousand people were out on the street outside the bank, watching the match on giant outdoor televisions and preparing to celebrate Germany's 1-0 over South Korea, at the time the robber struck.

Germany had scored less than 10 minutes before the robber entered the bank.

"The bank robber collected the money and was able to escape undetected," a Berlin police spokesman said.

SEAMAN UNSURE

BBC, London

England goalkeeper David Seaman has postponed his decision over whether to retire from international football until after he has taken a summer holiday.

The 38-year-old broke down in tears after Ronaldinho beat him with a free-kick to put Brazil into the semi-final of the World Cup last Friday.

But England coach Sven-Goran Eriksson has said that if Seaman is still the best keeper at his disposal then he will continue to pick him for the European Championship campaign.

"I've just got to sit down in the summer, have a nice holiday and think what I want," said Seaman.

DIOUF DEAL DONE

AP, Liverpool

Senegal star striker El Hadji Diouf completed his 10 million pound (22.8 million dollar) move to Liverpool on Tuesday.

The Premier League club flew officials out to the World Cup in Japan within hours of Senegal's quarterfinal defeat by Turkey on Saturday so the 21-year-old could undergo a medical.

Liverpool manager Gerard Houllier wanted to eliminate any chance of a late swoop by Serie A giants Juventus.

Diouf, who moves from French club Lens and is one of 33 players on FIFA's provisional World Cup all-star team list, said he was happy to continue his rise to prominence in the Premier League.

CROSSWORD By Eugene Sheffer

Crossword puzzle grid with clues for Across and Down words.

Cryptoquip puzzle grid with numbers 1-53 and a key for letters.

Solution for the crossword puzzle, listing words like Moonshine, vassal, Authoritative, etc.

The Cryptoquip is a substitution cipher in which one letter stands for another. If you think that X equals O, it will equal O throughout the puzzle. Single letters, short words and words using an apostrophe give you clues to locating vowels. Solution is by trial and error.